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THE TENSION OF WORSHIP
Isaiah 6:1-8
John 1:1-5, 14

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

In a delightful new book, Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner, has provided some amusing and provocative definitions of words that are common in the Christian vocabulary. The entry under Worship reads as follows:

"To Worship God means to serve him. Basically there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for him that he needs to have done - run errands for him, carry messages for him, fight on his side, feed his lambs, and so on. The other way is to do things for him that you need to do - sing songs for him, create beautiful things for him, give things up for him, tell him what's on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for him the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love" (Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC P97-98)

What we do on Sunday morning falls into the second category - things we need to do for God. And at this hour a rather substantial number of people are doing those things: singing songs, giving things up, praying, listening. Although I would hasten to add, without much self awareness. For while corporate worship is the most common characteristic of Christians everywhere, and while the same basic things happen whether you are sitting in High Mass, a Presbyterian family service or an Evangelistic Revival, and while all the books say that worship is the very focal point of the church's life, there are probably few other typically Christian activities about which we know less and which are victims of the same degree of misunderstanding, personal whim and private preference.

define the variety

Presbyterian worship rests on some rather clear assumptions. The way those assumptions are acted out is expressed in your bulletin insert. They are that:

Background - one of many things necessary at this point

Worship is something people do together: it is a corporate activity that the church does regularly and which absorbs our individual worshipping. It is an activity - something people do, not something done for them or to them. It is thus, participatory. That is to say, you may listen to good music and hear a great sermon and not necessarily have worshipped.

Calvin -

Worship is, secondly, essentially a response. It is something we do because

God has done something first. It may be for some of us a way of looking for God or forgiveness or meaning or just something to do on Sunday morning. But essentially it is the act Christians have felt constrained to perform in grateful and joyful response to God's prior act - namely Jesus Christ.

Worship, in the third place, is - for Presbyterians a process with a beginning, middle and ending. It is not arbitrary: it demands thoughtful understanding. It ought never to be slip-shod. Because it is the way we respond to God, we ought to know why we are doing it, and we ought to do it as well as we are able.

Now let's probe a little deeper. The Old Testament Lesson this morning has always been held up as a prototype worship experience. Isaiah was in the Temple and he had a rather remarkable vision. He saw God's mystery and holiness in a new way. He was frightened and made aware of his own smallness and humaness. But then one of the six winged-seraphim flew to him and touched his lips with a burning coal from the altar. The up-shot is that God gave him something to do. If we can add some analytical words to the Biblical account the experience began with the awesome otherness of the divine; what the theologians call the "mysterium tremendum". It moves then to the intimacy of the divine: God draws near and touches the man. It concludes with mission - an assignment.

Add to that now the New Testament Lesson, the familiar preface to the fourth Gospel. It too begins with an affirmation of God's otherness, his eternity, creativity and power: ("In the beginning was the Word...".) And then it moves to the immediate, the intimate, the ordinary: ("And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...")

The tension between those two ideas - the distance of God - and his nearness is necessary to any understanding of the Biblical affirmations about God. And it is also that same tension that informs and moves through our practice of corporate worship. When the tension is broken: when God's distance is emphasized at the expense of his closeness, or when his immediacy outweighs his otherness, we have gotten off the track.

Let's look at them separately beginning with God's distance. The assertion that there is a God is really an astounding assertion, although we've gotten rather accustomed to it. Every now and then we need to let it slap us in the face to regain our attention.

There is a God. That vast universe out htere is inhabited indeed: it is the reflection and handiwork of an eternal force that at the same time pays attention to sparrows and crysanthemums. If there is a God, he is holy, that is to say -other, apart, separate, different. In the Biblical idiom ("His" ways are not our ways .) If there is a God, then he is essentially unknowable to the mind of man except as he choses to reveal himself to us. We could pursue this ad infinitum. The point is that the starting point of worship is Isaiah trembling in the Temple: Moses removing his shoes before the burning bush: you and I walking into this sanctuary and being reminded that there is a God - A God who defies description; who is beyond our superlatives, a God who is God.

And right away we have a rather gritty problem. We don't want to be overwhelmed by anything. William Sloane Coffin ~~(Thesis Theological Cassettes)~~ has suggested that modern man has been so overwhelmed so many times by what he sees happening in the world that he doggedly resists being overwhelmed by anything. In a relatively short period of time we have had to adjust to the reality of space travel - and the fact that most of you don't know the names of those three Americans riding around in Skylab shows how casual we have become. We have had to adjust to thinking about hundreds of billions of dollars. We have had towatch hundreds of thousands of human beings starving right in our own living rooms. And as a consequence we've done a rather natural thing: we've constructed an internal, emotional defense system against being overwhelmed by anything. We try to take things in little, mangeable chunks. The more complex and overwhelming Watergate becomes - the more the American People seem to want to pretend that it didn't happen; or if it did, it's of no consequence. The more frightening the 70's become, the more intrigued we are with the manageable 50's. We don't care to be overwhelmed anymore - by anything. Even God.

In addition, we are - all of us - children of a scientific, technological culture that seems to be telling us that man is self-sufficient; that belief in anything other than the objective , documented reality of the laboratory is mere superstition and ought now to be put to rest. Man, we are told - in a gross misuse of Bonhoeffer's phrase, has "come of age" and no longer needs the primeval myth of a heavenly father. One writer observes: ("The goal toward which both scientist and philosopher are working is a state in which there will be no more mystery".) Just man - standing utterly, nobly alone.

a dogmatic basis for there than a premise that is no truth other Marxist dogma

The trouble with that it that it's been an unmitigated disaster whenever it has been followed to its conclusion. Brave and brilliant men are languishing in Russian prisons for insisting that there is more to existence than what meets the eye. And in an excellent editorial in the Journal and Courier recently Gary Wills observed with devasting accuracy that: "Man is often at his lowest,... when he thinks he is the peak of creation...If we have learned anything since 1933, it is that the 'Uebermonsch' (Superman) is a midget. By contrast, the whole experience of prayer and poetry... suggests the mysterious way man frees himself by bowing, and grows by bending the knee." ~~J&C, 9/10/73~~

Man needs God in order to be man. Man needs to be always in relation to the mystery and grandeur of the whole created order - just to keep things in perspective.

A passage from one of Vincent Van Gogh's letters reads: "I can do very well without God, both in my life and my painting, but I cannot, i|| as I am, do without something that is greater than I, which is my life - a power to create..." ~~(Sam Keen, Apology for Wonder, P. 210)~~

And Dag Hammarskjold: "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason." (~~Markings,~~ P. 56)

And President Hansen, addressing the County Ministerial Association, as the head of this week one of the greatest institutions of science and technology in the world literally pleaded the same case. "The job of religion" he suggested, is to force all men to keep both eyes open - to see that truth is not defined by science alone; that there is mystery, wonder, goodness and truth in the universe absolutely: that is to say - we've made a serious mistake when we put all our eggs in the one basket of man's ability to save himself.

Well, corporate worship, ought to begin by hitting us with that. It ought to remind us that God is. There ought to be something of the Burning Bush in it and the mystery of the six-winged seraphim. It ought to suggest majesty, glory, holiness, distance.

But - and now we have to look at the other pole of the tension - what makes worship specifically Christian is the more astounding assertion that this same God of mystery, eternity and holiness has anddoes come near. He is like a father: he is intimate and '

loving and caring. He is as personal as a new born baby in a manger: as real as a man dying on a cross on a Friday afternoon: I came across a vignette recently that said it completely. An elderly man allowed that when he got depressed he turned to those long lists of names in the "begat" sections of the Bible for inspiration. Because, he explained, here was a list of totally ordinary people, who never did anything spectacular who lived their small lives and passed out of history, but who were remembered and known by God - by name.

There ought to be some of that in worship too: some of the eternal God who knows and loves us as a father loves his own children; some of the compassion and caring for individuals that so characterized the life of Jesus Christ. Worship ought to provide time to affirm the intimacy of a God who likes to be called Father.

The two in tension: God far - God near: God the omnipotent - God the loving father: God the "mysterium tremendum" - God the friend of little children.

What usually happens is that we break the tension and go too far in one direction or the other. At the time of the Reformation God's distance had been emphasized at the expense of his nearness. It was all mystery and holiness and distance: and part of what the Reformation did was to rediscover the other half of the Good News; i.e. that in Jesus Christ God makes common cause with common men.

Cathedrals inspire me. For me, they are monuments to man's indomitable spirit and his inspired genius. They contain the history of Western Civilization in their very walls. They do not, however, help much by way of affirming God's nearness. We visited quite a few: St. Paul's in London, Sir Christopher Wren's masterpiece; a mammouth, incredibly beautiful building that became an inspiration to the whole world during the blitz. We stayed for Evensong on a Wednesday afternoon: a brief worship experience traditional in the Church of England. We sat a full one hundred yards from the priest and choir. The music was in the mode of a Gregorian Chant - it echoed hauntingly through the building and I couldn't help but reflect on the mystery and majesty of God who could so inspire a people for all these centuries. Aesthetically it was beautiful. I loved it: spiritually it left me cold. It affirmed nothing about God's immediacy - nearness, at least nothing that my Presbyterian antennae picked up.

The same experience followed us - to Canterbury, for instance, the historic seat of English speaking Christianity, the place memoralized by Chaucer and in which Thomas a Becket, the Archbishop was murdered. Again, there are few words to describe the thrill of standing in it. It makes the spirit soar. But it is so magnificient you cannot see the altar - where the action is - from the chairs in the Nave.

The tendency in our day - in our culture - is in the opposite direction. The God of American piety is almost too near, and a typical American worship experience is almost too cozy. We have systematically domesticated God in our culture by invoking his presence at football games, P.T.A. meetings, and every session of congress. In the name of relevance we have become gimmicky. In the name of intimacy we have become maudlin and syrupy. And left out of it all is the holy God of righteousness, justice, peace and mercy. In his place we would substitute the "man up stairs"; the God of the White House who blesses the irrational bombing of Asian peasants: the God who saves individual souls but has no concern with society as a whole.

The purpose of worship is to put people in touch with a God who is terrible in his holiness, majestic, awesome, perfect - but who, in gracious love comes near to his people to touch their lives in ways that are marvelously personal. That's what it's about - and if you don't experience both - you've been cheated.

Often, it seems to me, the two separate experiences come together. One seems to provoke the other. For me, at least, a tremendous experience with nature - a walk through a misty moor in Scotland for instance, almost inevitably moves me to think of the miracle of a God who somehow knows I'm walking there, knows my name and walks with me.

The most intimate and personal experiences - the birth of my child, for instance, inevitably leads me to reflect on this mysterious force of life built into the very nature of things; this incredible miracle that I've been given to experience and yet which has been happening for thousands of years, billions of times.

God far: God near: two ideas in tension. Worship intends to put you in touch with both. In touch, that is to say, with the essence of the Gospel: that God in his almightiness, his mystery and holiness - knows you and loves you and comes to you. AMEN

Father, we don't always think through our reasons for being here. Give us some sense of your majesty. And then, help us to know your nearness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN